

Five Reasons Not to Blog

BY CHRIS HARRIS

It is wonderful that so many teachers and librarians are exploring the power and potential of blogging and other interactive tools. Unfortunately, some educators should have thought twice before answering the call to post. Some districts have found this out the hard way, having to deal with the fallout from truly inappropriate staff behavior online.

So who should avoid using social software? A teacher who paints with his buttocks—and posts the video



to YouTube (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16178296), perhaps. Or how about one who refers to their students in a blog post as “drugged out idiots” (www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-09-17-teacher-blogs_x.htm). Cautionary tales, to be sure.

If you're wondering when you should apply a little self-censorship, consider the top five reasons not to blog:

1. “I want to give them a piece of my mind!”

Ah... but which piece. If it's that deep, dark, secret bit that we try hard not to let slip out in public, then you would do well to avoid blogging about it. Don't forget that blogs are a very public medium, and there are many ways you can unintentionally reveal your identity.

While your contract may not preclude blogging itself, you still need to be very careful about what you write. Teacher contracts usually include a clause regarding conduct, and violations can, in some situation, result in dismissal. A good rule of thumb is to use social software as if your supervisor subscribed to your RSS feed—I know mine does.

2. “Oh, the stories I could tell.”

Keep in mind that as a teacher-librarian your First Amendment rights are superseded (to a point) by the con-



fidentiality requirements of working with children. Blogs should certainly never include negative references to students, identifiable or not, and should probably avoid even positive references about individual students without permission from a parent or guardian. Telling tales about colleagues or specific work situations may also land you in trouble.

3. “I think I can find some time at school...”

Blogging takes time, but not during school hours, please. Use of school equipment for non-school activities likely violates board policy. Even if you are writing about professional practices on your personal blog, you should not do so using school equipment or the school's network access.

4. “Nobody will find out that it's me.”

Oh, I didn't realize you were going to blog offline, on an unplugged computer, in a locked room, in your secret bunker. Once you go online, all expectations for privacy disappear. I'm not saying that you need to

don a tinfoil hat, but with every click, understand that you are building a trail of evidence.

In a worst case scenario, an inappropriate blog may warrant a subpoena to your Internet service provider. Despite your best efforts, information will inevitably slip out. So you're starting back to school in August? Have a winter break in February to save heating costs? All of these bits of information can help reveal your “secret” identity. And don't forget that all of your entries are subject to full-text indexing.

5. “It's OK, I will keep it private.”

Again, keep in mind that unbecoming conduct can invoke a morality clause in teacher contracts that could get you fired. Some districts view the possession of a MySpace account as inappropriate in that it could lead to unacceptable fraternization with students. In the same way that teachers being arrested for driving while intoxicated receives unwelcome news coverage, educators use of social technologies is subject to a higher level of scrutiny. This includes your personal, private use of these technologies that are, by their very nature, so public.

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